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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to identify external and internal influences that affected the decision making of four secondary teachers regarding the content of a family living course and to describe their decision-making strategies. Because the course had been shortened and a new textbook and new state guidelines had been received, the teachers had to revise the local curriculum guide. Methodology included observation, interviews, and document collection. The most important influences found to affect teacher decisions were curriculum resources, teacher repertoire and values, and student interests and needs. Two content selection strategies were identified: (1) curriculum by repertoire, i.e., the three teachers who had recently taught the course followed their repertoire from the past with only minor changes; and (2) curriculum by authoritative resource, i.e., the one teacher who had not recently taught the course relied heavily upon the textbook. Findings show that teachers rely heavily on curriculum resources during repertoire formation. Therefore, supervisors should carefully oversee the selection of those materials. Also, since repertoire serves as a limiting factor in teachers' future content decisions, supervisors should direct special attention to guiding teachers during their initial teaching experience with a course. (RM)

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TEACHERS' CONTENT DECISIONS: POTENTIAL FOR CONFLICT IN LOCAL CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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TEACHERS' CONTENT DECISIONS: POTENTIAL FOR CONFLICT IN LOCAL CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Content decisions have long been recognized as crucial factors in schooling. Because the selection of course content has educational, political, and sociological implications, the process by which this selection occurs merits examination. Description of content decisions made by teachers is an important area of concern for investigation, for it is teachers who are the "ultimate arbiters of classroom practice" (Doyle and Ponder, 1977, p. 75).

The educational significance of content has been emphasized by the findings of teacher effectiveness studies. In a review of these studies, Rosenshine and Furst (1971) identified content covered as one of the most consistent variables associated with student achievement, and in 1979 Rosenshine singled it out as one of the variables having shown the best results in subsequent research. He concluded that content covered has emerged as one of the most important variables in current educational thinking. More recently Milton Goldberg, executive director of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, reported that curriculum content was one of three variables identified by the commission as "most crucial to improving the quality of education" (Goldberg, cited in "Improving American Education: Are Standards the Route to Excellence?", 1982, p.1).

In addition to its educational significance, content covered in schools has political implications. To the extent that content is imposed upon students and its selection is influenced by external pressures, content decisions are political in nature (Schwille, Porter, &

Gant, 1980). The recent portrayal of educational organizations as "loosley coupled systems" (Weick, 1976) has highlighted the degree of autonomy enjoyed by teachers, a concomitant effect of which is to open them to a myriad of external forces attempting to influence their content decisions.

Content decisions have sociological implications to the extent that beliefs about what knowledge is worth knowing result in the differential distribution of knowledge in schools (Schwille, Porter, Gant, Belli, Floden, Freeman, Knappen, Kuhs, & Schmidt, 1979). Eggleston (1977) and Apple (1979) are among critical theorists who have held that schools reflect the social order and perpetuate dominant social class values and existing hierarchies. And Davis (1983), in a recent presidential address to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, maintained, "The concern of educators seeking to educate for liberty should be, 'What knowledge for whom?'"

Teachers' content decisions thus can be important determinants of the knowledge distribution patterns in schools and society. This idea, coupled with the findings of curriculum implementation studies (i.e., Berman & McLaughlin, 1978) has led to increased interest in local curriculum development and teacher participation in that process (Ponder, 1983; Short, 1982). Mapping of the influences on teachers' content decisions and the strategies they employ in decision making during the local curriculum development process is therefore important and timely.

Several researchers have examined the processes by which content selection takes place in the classroom. Zahorik (1975) found that selection of content, not objectives, was most frequently the decision

made first by teachers when plannning instruction. Leithwood, Ross, and Montgomery (1982) conducted an interview study of 93 randomly selected teachers in Canada, approximately two-thirds of whom were elementary teachers, to identify factors influencing their curriculum decisions. They found that "students' needs, characteristics, and responses" and "teacher background, preference, and skills" were the most pervasive clusters of factors mentioned in the interviews. Results of a questionnaire administered to the same teachers identified the teachers' "past experiences" as the highest ranking influence on curriculum decisions. Regarding the "planning/organizing and development" functions within the teachers' general curriculum decision making, local curriculum guidelines, texts, and fellow staff members were the dominant influences.

A research team at the Institute for Research on Teaching has conducted for the past several years an ongoing study of external factors influencing the content selection decisions of elementary math teachers (e.g., Schwille, Porter, Belli, Floden, Freeman, Knappen, Kuhs, & Schmidt, 1982; Floden, Porter, Schmidt, Freeman, & Schwille, 1981). They found that teacher repertoire served as the starting point for teachers' content decisions. External factors such as standardized test results, district objectives, and textbooks had considerable influence, while personal influences from principals, parents, and students had only small effects on teachers' content selection. Their concern was limited to the selection of content and did not extend to content emphasis, a factor which may account for the apparent discrepancy with the findings of Leithwood et al. regarding students' influence.

The present study expanded research into teachers' content decisions to the secondary level, examining decision making for a minimally text-bound course containing potentially controversial content. In addition to describing influences on teachers' content decisions during lesson planning, it sought to describe the processes used by teachers to negotiate content during local curriculum development.

Purpose

This paper describes selected findings from a qualitative study of the content decisions of four secondary teachers who served on a local curriculum development committee for a high school elective course, Family Living. The study examined influences on their content selection during lesson planning over a semester and analyzed the strategies they employed during curriculum development meetings.

Teachers of Family Living in this suburban school district were chosen for study because the course was only minimally text-bound and had been the subject of community controversy in the past. A needs assessment had been conducted prior to the study to determine the course objectives which parents, teachers, and students felt were appropriate. In addition, a new textbook had been adopted, and a new state curriculum guide for the course had been received.

Within this framework of potential influences, the teachers revised their local course outline and objectives. The purpose of the study was to identify the external influences, such as principals and curriculum resources, and the internal influences, such as teacher values and repertoire, which impinged upon their decision making and to describe the

content selection strategies and rationales used by the teachers during curriculum development.

Procedures

Because the goal of the study was detailed description of a number of interrelated factors and processes within a particular setting over time, the qualitative case study approach, rather than a survey or one-shot interview, was selected. A triangulated data collection procedure involving observation, interviews, and document collection was used to build a data base from which to infer content influences and decision-making strategies.

Specifically, all curriculum meetings for the family living course over a seven-month period were attended and audiotape-recorded. Following each meeting, modified stimulated recall interviews were conducted with each of the four subjects who had attended. In addition, the teachers were interviewed biweekly over a semester to discuss the content they had selected during preparation of weekly lesson plans for the course and the influences on those content decisions. A participant construct instrument (Munby, 1983) based on Kelly's repertory grid technique (1955) was administered to each subject to elicit her teaching beliefs. Relevant curriculum documents including textbook contents, state and local curriculum guidelines, and teachers' lesson plans were obtained. The resulting data base consisted of 411 single-spaced pages of transcripts, as well as the curriculum documents.

Data analysis consisted of the use of a categorical coding system for content analysis of the transcripts of meetings and interviews. The

coding categories emerged and were constantly refined in an iterative analysis of the data, as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their constant comparative method. Comparative analysis of transcripts and curriculum documents resulted in an outline of 55 content influences (see Appendix) and a description of strategies the teachers used to select content during curriculum development and lesson planning. The findings were reviewed and confirmed by each teacher in a follow-up interview.

Findings

Content Influences

The 55 content influences identified in this study were categorized as follows: teacher variables, student variables, administrative constraints, personal influences, curriculum resources, and other influences. In this study, the primary source of content planned by the teachers was curriculum resources, in particular, the district curriculum guide. Although the district had no monitoring system or standardized test to ensure use of the guide, all four of the teachers followed its content to a large degree, as indicated by the extent to which the content in their lesson plans matched both the scope and sequence of the guide. Variance did exist, however, in the way they viewed the guide, with some seeing it as a comprehensive list of approved topics, with others viewing it as a minimum list of content to which they could add as they saw fit.

While the curriculum guide had served as their primary source of content when they first began teaching the course, teacher repertoire

functioned as the primary influence on their lesson planning during the semester under study. Three of the teachers had taught the course for several years. Their teaching repertoire consisted not only of a complex semantic network of course scope, sequence, and learning activities, but also of written records, including semester outlines and daily lesson plans. Much of this repertoire had been based originally on the local curriculum guide, hence, the close match between its content and the content they planned for their classes. Over the years they had taught the course, these three teachers had internalized the guide's content to the point that its scope and sequence had become their conception of the subject matter of the course. New inputs during the semester under study, such as the newly adopted textbook and the new state guidelines, were incorporated by these teachers only to the extent to which they were compatible with established repertoire, or, in a few instances, provided information which, in the teachers' view, addressed previously unmet student needs. The importance of teacher repertoire as a starting point for current content planning is consistent with the findings of Leithwood et al. (1982) and Schwille et al. (1982).

The fourth teacher had taught the course in the past, but not for the two years prior to the study. Thinking that she would not be teaching it again, she had discarded her files. While she had retained a very general cognitive conception of the structure of the course content, the details of the learning activities had become blurred, and she had no written records to fall back upon for assistance in preparing lesson plans. Her solution was to rely heavily upon the textbook, in contrast to the other teachers, who used it only minimally. She was careful,

however, to try to stay within the framework provided by the curriculum guide. Minor discrepancies in sequence between the guide and the text created a continuing dilemma for her throughout the semester, while the others simply dismissed the discrepancies by following what they had done in the past. One of them attempted to follow the new textbook at the beginning of the semester, but she quickly dropped that effort, stating, "It's like I put my dress on before I put my undergarments on. It felt funny."

In addition to teacher repertoire, another internal factor, teacher values, served as a filter for content influences during the study. For example, an administrative ban against the teaching of birth control had been given prior to the study as the result of controversy created by a local church group. The needs assessment data, however, indicated strong community support for the topic. Three of the teachers were strongly opposed to the ban, believing that high school students needed the information. All of these teachers found ways to address the topic in their classes, even though one of them had been reprimanded previously as the result of the controversy. The fourth teacher felt that birth control should be taught at home; she followed the ban meticulously. The inconsistency of the influences apparently allowed individual teacher values to operate, with each teacher following the influence consistent with her values.

Perceived student interests and needs appeared to play a large role in the teachers' content decisions, particularly in regard to content emphasis. In the interviews, references to student variables outnumbered references to any of the other categories. This finding is consistent

with the findings of Leithwood et al. (1982), in which the category of "Student needs, characteristics, and responses" was the most pervasive cluster of variables identified in interviews with teachers. In the present study, student variables appeared to inform decisions about the pacing of content, with decisions about the selection of content determined primarily by the curriculum guide. For example, one of the teachers stated, "My kids are so uninterested in dating, because to them we are past that, so I will spend a very little bit of time...."

Finally, administrative constraints such as interruptions, lack of time in the course, and lack of available resources served a limiting function in content emphasis decisions. These constraints forced the teachers to make difficult decisions about elimination or reduction of topics they had selected.

Overall, the content influences identified in this study support the model of teacher decision making described by Shavelson and Stern (1981). This model portrays pedagogical decisions as resulting from the teacher's combining information about student variables, teacher variables, and task variables (such as curriculum materials), the entire process of which is influenced by institutional constraints. The important influences on content decisions identified in the present study were curriculum resources, teacher repertoire and values, and student interests and needs, with administrative constraints serving a limiting function. A number of other factors, such as personal influence from principals and parents, played relatively minor roles in the teachers' decision making, but the major factors provide empirical evidence supporting the teacher decision-making model.

Content Selection Strategies

As described above, three of the teachers had taught the course for several years, while the fourth teacher had just resumed teaching the course after a break of two years. The strategies employed by these teachers in lesson content selection differed, with the first three following their repertoire from the past with only minor changes, while the fourth relied heavily upon the textbook.

Because the course had been shortened from twenty-four to eighteen weeks and a new textbook and new state guidelines had been received, revision of the local curriculum guide had become necessary. Several curriculum development meetings were held for that purpose during the semester under study. The task for these meetings was for the four teachers to work together to revise the course outline and objectives to reflect the new inputs.

Two strategies for the selection of content during curriculum development were identified through participant observation of these meetings and subsequent interviews with the four teachers. The first strategy was typified by "Wendy" and called "curriculum by repertoire." This strategy was also employed by the other two teachers who, along with Wendy, had taught the course for the past several years. The second strategy was employed by "Ann," the fourth teacher, and was termed "curriculum by authoritative resource." The conflict generated by the use of these opposing strategies caused an ongoing problem at the meetings held during the semester.

Curriculum by repertoire. Wendy's approach was to lobby for having the revised curriculum guide match her own repertoire as closely as possible. She explained, "My philosophy is, everything that is important to me I argue with them about in the meeting and get them to do it my way." It should be noted that Wendy's repertoire had been based originally upon an earlier, but very similar, version of the local curriculum guide. However, the guide's content had become internalized to the point that the critical element underlying her strategy was not to make the new guide match the old guide, but to make the new guide match her conception of the course, as it had evolved through her teaching experiences, hence, "curriculum by repertoire." As she put it, "I realize that I've taught this class so long that I want to make the outline the way I teach it because it makes good sense to me."

In addition to wanting the guide to match her repertoire because it "made sense," Wendy's rationale for this strategy included a desire for justification of what she was teaching: "When you get right down to it, I see it [the guide] more as protection more than anything else, as a defense for doing what I want to do." Wendy's concern for justification was probably heightened by the fact that she was the teacher who had been involved in the birth control controversy. Having official sanction for what she was teaching in the form of an approved curriculum guide would protect her from further reprimands at the hands of school administrators.

Curriculum by authoritative resource. Ann's approach to curriculum development was to press for rewriting the course guide to follow the new textbook, or failing that, the new state guidelines. Her stated

rationale for this strategy was a desire for simplification of lesson planning by facilitating the use of currently available curriculum resources such as the textbook. As Ann stated,

> You could teach it like this book is, write the curriculum -- or teach it like the [state] guide, write the curriculum -- and then you would not be doing all this mess all the time. They're not doing all this planning because they've taught it.

Ann wanted a guide which would be useful, both in lesson planning and in generating easily implemented classroom activities such as reading the textbook. Because the other teachers had well-developed repertoires and did not have a need, therefore, for a guide to inform lesson planning or to generate class activities, the guide's usefulness was not an important factor to them.

A secondary rationale underlying Ann's press for "curriculum by authoritative resource" was her desire for an authoritative reference with which to justify course content, not to school administrators, but to the students. She stated,

> I will not stand up there and have them question everything I say, which is exactly what they do to me. "Where did you get this?" That is the way I am using the textbook.

Having a highly credible source which would be respected by the students was important to her for two possible reasons. First, it could be that her desire for an authoritative basis for course content was related to her lack of an established repertoire, as was her desire to simplify lesson planning. Second, it may be that teaching from an authoritative reference is simply her preferred teaching style.

The ongoing conflict which occurred on this committee resulted from the different rationales with which the teachers approached the task of

curriculum development. In summary of the strategies employed by these teachers, three of them pressed for a document which matched their repertoires because it "made sense" and would formally justify what they had been doing, "curriculum by repertoire." The fourth teacher pressed for a guide which matched a currently available curriculum resource because her lesson planning would thereby be simplified and she would have an authoritative source to increase her credibility with the students, "curriculum by authoritative resource." Because she was outnumbered, the fourth teacher's arguments failed, and the revised curriculum document reflected little change, in spite of the potential influence of significant new inputs such as the new state guidelines and a new textbook.

Another potential type of conflict which did not occur here, but which was alluded to by the teachers in discussing other curriculum committees on which they had served, is the conflict of repertoire versus repertoire. This type of conflict may result when teachers on a curriculum development committee have conflicting repertoires. This had created serious problems in the situations the teachers described, and an outside arbitrator, the curriculum consultant, had been called upon to settle the disputes in those situations. In the present case, the existing repertoires of the teachers were similar enough that this type of conflict was avoided.

Implications

This study provides "thick description" of the conflict which occurred during teacher participation in curriculum development as the

result of the employment by the teachers of differing content selection strategies and rationales. In a period of increased attention to teacher participation in local curriculum development, this information can be valuable at the practical level in several ways. Curriculum supervisors may find it helpful when selecting members for curriculum development committees to attempt to identify the strategies which might be used by potential members. Because teachers with and without established repertoires will be working with the completed curriculum documents, the inclusion of teachers representing both perspectives on the committee could be valuable. Once the committee is formed, explaining to them the conflicting strategies they might encounter could enable them to work past any resulting conflict to an acceptable compromise. Such an explanation to the teachers could reduce the possibility that any ensuing conflict might be attributed by them to personality conflict, thereby making rational solutions more difficult.

In addition to explication of the strategies employed by teachers during curriculum development, this study expands the research base regarding influences on teachers' content decisions to the secondary level. It provides further information about the dynamics involved in teachers' resistance to change and the ways in which teachers use curriculum resources. At the practical level, the findings of this study appear to indicate that curriculum supervisors seeking to optimize teachers' content decisions might achieve the greatest influence through two activities. First, since teachers appear to rely heavily on curriculum resources, particularly during repertoire formation, supervisors should carefully oversee the selection of those materials.

Second, since repertoire, once it is formed, appears to serve as a limiting factor in teachers' future content decisions, supervisors should direct special attention to the guidance of teachers during their inital teaching experience with a course. Assistance with and supervision of content selection during this period is likely to be better received by teachers and to have stronger long-term effects than subsequent intervention after repertoire is formed. In states which are currently adding a year of closely supervised internship to teacher preparation programs, content selection may be an especially fruitful area of attention, particularly in light of the strongly documented relationship between content covered and student achievement.

APPENDIX

Coding Categories

Teacher Variables

Teacher values -- references to personal beliefs and priorities.

Teacher conception of subject matter -- references to a personal conceptualization of the structure of the subject matter.

Teacher repertoire -- references to what the teacher had done in previous classes.

Teacher experiences -- personal experiences in the teacher's background.

Teacher time -- references to limitations on the available time of the teacher.

Teacher absence and/or illness -- references to being absent or not feeling well in class.

Teacher knowledge -- references to the teacher's level of knowledge related to a topic.

Teacher characteristics -- characteristics of the teacher, such as age.

Student Variables

Student interests -- indications of interest in a topic by students.

Student needs -- needs of students as perceived by the teacher.

Student experiences -- personal experiences of students.

Student characteristics -- characteristics of students, such as maturity level and sex.

Student attitudes and/or feelings -- references to students' affective dimension, such as "negative attitude."

Student knowledge -- references to students' level of knowledge about particular topics.

Student ability -- student ability to do course work, such as reading level.

Student cognitive level -- references to students' cognitive level, such as ability to apply knowledge.

Student evaluations -- course evaluation forms completed by students.

Student basic skills -- student skills such as writing ability, currently being heavily emphasized by the school district.

Former students -- communication with former students.

Student behavior -- students' overt classroom behavior.

Student miscellaneous -- references to other student variables not fitting into one of the above categories.

Administrative Constraints

Availability of resources -- references to resources which are not available when needed or which are available on the market but not possessed.

Time -- references to the time limitations of the course.

Interruptions -- interference with available class time, such as assemblies.

Administrative directive -- references to the administrative directive removing birth control from the curriculum.

Grades and/or tests -- references to having to take time out to get grades or give tests.

Overlapping students -- references to content repetition caused by students' taking several home economics courses with overlapping content.

Declining enrollment -- references to the decreasing enrollment in home economics courses and consequent efforts to attract students.

Personal Influences

Other teachers -- references to other teachers, through conversations or meetings.

Parents -- references to communication with parents.

Home economics consultant -- references to the district curriculum consultant for home economics.

Instructional administrator -- references to the building administrator for curriculum and instruction.

Principal -- references to the building principal.

Counselor -- school counselor.

Superintendent -- district superintendent.

Curriculum Resources

Text -- references to the textbook used in the course, Relationships: A Study in Human Behavior.

Resources -- educational materials other than books, such as films, filmstrips, and the student magazine Current Lifestudies.

Curriculum guide -- locally developed curriculum guide for the Home and Family Living course.

State guide -- state Home and Family Living curriculum guide developed at Texas Tech (referred to as the "Tech guide").

Other books -- books such as library books and other textbooks and teacher's guides.

State outline -- the state home economics curriculum outline, Conceptual Framework.

Text guide -- teacher's guide to the textbook.

Block plan -- the weekly course outline prepared jointly by the teachers in the study.

Outside sources -- references to other resources, such as popular magazines.

Other Influences

Potential criticism -- references to the possibility of criticism, primarily from parents, for teaching certain topics.

Outside influences -- societal influences, such as unemployment and the media.

Speakers -- references to content brought in by outside resource persons in presentations to the class.

Default -- references to a policy of teaching something until someone raises an objection.

Needs assessment -- the community survey conducted in the year prior to the study to determine which objectives should be taught in home economics courses.

School board -- references to the local school board.

Advisory council -- references to the district advisory council for consumer home economics.

Course description -- references to the course description written jointly by the teachers in a curriculum meeting.

Classroom management -- references to classroom management procedures.

In-service -- references to material covered at in-service for home economics teachers.

College classes -- references to material covered in college classes.

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